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Remarks by The Honorable Fred Gregory
NASA Deputy Administrator
African American History Month Celebration
Baltimore-Washington International Airport

Thank you Paul (Paul Wiedefeld, Executive Director, Maryland Aviation Administration). And I thank everyone for coming today.

When I accepted your generous invitation to speak at this distinguished event, never for a moment did I think we would be meeting today under such sad circumstances, with our hearts united in grief.

Indeed, people of all races, religions and nationalities have gathered this week in spirit to mourn seven fallen heroes. And the members of the NASA family sincerely appreciate your expressions of condolence.

Yesterday, I was in Houston to participate in the memorial service in honor of the astronauts. President Bush, a man of great faith, comforted the astronauts' families and the entire Nation with his moving tribute to the Columbia crew.

For the past 96 hours we have been working nonstop to find out what caused Saturday's terrible accident. And when we find these answers, it is our firm intention to correct the problems we find and to make certain this never happens again. As Administrator Sean O'Keefe has said, we owe this to the brave families of the astronauts and the American people. And we will make good on this solemn pledge.

As you can expect from the dedicated public servants who work for NASA—our scientists, engineers, safety and support people—we are conducting our work with tremendous professionalism and respect for the enormity of our duty.

We don't know when our efforts will be completed, but you can be assured that we will strive unceasingly to honor the legacy of the brave Columbia astronauts.

I decided to honor my commitment to this event for an important reason. As we continue to leave no stone unturned in order to find and correct the problems that led to Saturday's tragedy, we can learn from our history, gain perspective from it, and, hopefully the **wisdom** that is so sorely needed in these trying times. Indeed, all of us can benefit from a proper appreciation of our history.

This African American History month, it is instructive to recall that our ancestors' history contains many useful lessons for the situation that cruel fate has thrust on us.

For what is the history of the African American experience if not a saga filled with struggle, with tragedy at times, but also with the uplifting qualities of perseverance, unity, triumph and glory?

I can see from your faces that the lessons of our history are bound in your hearts.

Indeed, in these sad times, we can all learn from the African American experience that even in the darkest moments of despair, there is reason for hope, and eventually grace. And I can think of no more appropriate time to absorb this lesson than now.

The astronauts' brave families know this universal truth. Throughout their ordeal, they have been rocks of courage and dignity, providing as much comfort to the Nation as we have to them. Following the accident, the families of the Columbia astronauts issued a statement to the public. I would like to repeat their eloquent words:

"On January 16th, we saw our loved ones launch into a brilliant, cloud-free sky. Their hearts were full of enthusiasm, pride in country, faith in their God, and a willingness to accept risk in the pursuit of knowledge – knowledge that might improve the quality of life for all mankind. Columbia's 16-day mission of scientific discovery was a great success, cut short by mere minutes – yet it will live on forever in our memories. We want to thank the NASA family and people from around the world for their incredible outpouring of love and support. Although we grieve deeply, as do the families of Apollo 1 and Challenger before us, the bold exploration of space must go on. Once the root cause of this tragedy is found and corrected, the legacy of Columbia must carry on – for the benefit of our children and yours."

These inspiring thoughts remind us of other legacies in the African American culture. Recently, many of us participated in the National Holiday Observance marking the 74th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, a man who we are always mindful of when we reflect on our history, and on the dual elements of triumph and tragedy in our national life.

While it is painful to note these past 35 years we've been tragically deprived of Dr. King's heroic leadership, we gratefully recall that Dr. King gave us his full measure of heart and soul as he changed the course of history in such places as Memphis….Birmingham….and Selma.

Indeed, Dr. King knew when events in the march of history look at their bleakest, rays of hope can very well be on the horizon.

So let us remember that 40 years ago this summer, a few miles from here in Washington, D.C., Dr. King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, boldly asking his fellow Americans to share his dream that his four children "will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Hope, in this case, was a good thing.

When we remember the faces of our Columbia astronauts—these talented, dedicated individuals of tremendous character—we celebrate the rich diversity of race, religion and nationality they represented. And we acknowledge how far we have come in those forty years.

Yesterday in Houston, Mr. O'Keefe spoke of the unity and comradeship of Columbia's crew, and the higher purposes for which we aspire. He recalled how as they circled the planet, the astronauts joyfully went up to the flight deck to see the image of the entire Earth and sky reflected in Kalpana Chawla's awestruck eye. This was the profound human unity that Dr. King prayed for. This was the unity our Columbia astronauts achieved.

Here in this great airport, as we gather to consider and learn from the pendulum swings between tragedy and triumph in our history, it is also useful to note that this year also marks the Centennial of flight.

Remembrance of the heroic conquest of air and space instructs us that for all the marvels we are accustomed to in the skies our progress has not been achieved without trial and tribulation.

In the days ahead we will take solace from the fact that the pioneers of the air and space frontier have always persevered. The history of flight tells us the value of resilience. We can and must learn from our setbacks and move forward to advance the noble goals motivating human exploration and discovery.

Fittingly, for this occasion, we seek to learn from the proud contributions of African Americans to flight—the epic adventure that began on the sandy beach of Kitty Hawk, that continues today onboard the International Space Station, and that our children, the next generation of explorers, will extend to more distant horizons.

When it comes to honoring the contributions of African Americans to flight, a good place to begin is with the story of one adventurous woman, a lady named Bessie Coleman.

Let me tell you about Bessie Coleman. A long time ago she grew up in Texas in a home that was poor in material wealth. But thanks to a strong, supportive family, her upbringing was rich in spirit. As an adult, Bessie decided to escape the Jim Crow segregated south, and moved to Chicago, where she lived with her brothers, and vowed to "amount to something."

This yearning took form in a desire to become a daredevil pilot. After been denied training opportunities here, Bessie had the gumption to travel to France, and received her pilot's license from the renowned Federation Aeronautique International in 1921. It was there she learned such breathtaking techniques as tail spins, banking and looping the loop.

Bessie returned home to great publicity, as she was the first African American pilot. And Bessie soon flew around the country in air shows that at her insistence were integrated, a remarkable occurrence for that time.

It is sad to note that Bessie's life also ended all too soon in a fatal flying accident in 1926. Yet, her pioneering legacy is still remembered and respected throughout the aviation community. And for African Americans, her trip to France was just as important as Lindbergh's subsequent flight to Paris.

So today, we remember and celebrate the life of Bessie Coleman, an aviation pioneer of uncommon courage and vision.

Of course, no discussion of the contributions of African Americans to flight could take place without proper mention of an intrepid group of pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

Back in 1941 when the Winds of War were stirring what would become mankind's greatest conflict, it was widely assumed that African Americans would play no role whatsoever in military aviation.

Back then there were no African American pilots in the armed services, and only a handful of civilian African American pilots, Bessie Coleman's example notwithstanding.

But nothing could diminish the fierce desire that many young African Americans had to become pilots and to prove their value to our country in its hour of need. That's all they asked—to have the opportunity to serve their country.

So young men like Lee Archer, who as a kid carved model airplanes and dreamed of being in a cockpit, a silk white scarf streaming out behind him, found

their way to the famed Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. And it is there where a veteran pilot named Chief Anderson taught them to fly.

One day the Tuskegee Institute had a very special visitor, Eleanor Roosevelt, our country's first lady. Despite the strenuous objections of her Secret Service men, Mrs. Roosevelt decided to take a spin in the air over Alabama with Chief Anderson at the controls.

Shortly thereafter, no doubt due to Mrs. Roosevelt's influence, President Franklin Roosevelt approved the activation of an all African-American unit for the Army Air Corps, the 332nd Fighter Group at the Tuskegee Army Air Field.

Once they graduated from their rigorous training, the 450 Tuskegee Airmen racked up one of the most impressive air combat records American fighters achieved in the North African and Italian campaigns of World War II, flying more than 15,000 combat sorties in all, destroying over 400 enemy aircraft.

And they did more than that, much more. By proving through their valorous service that African Americans could distinguish themselves in perilous conflict, the Tuskegee Airmen paved the way for the integration of the armed forces.

As Benjamin O. Davis Jr., a Tuskegee Airman who later became the Air Force's first African American general once said, "We knew then that whatever we did would have an effect on the future status of black people. We looked on the war, in one way, as an opportunity to advance a cause."

It goes without saying that I would not be standing here before you as a graduate of the Air Force Academy, veteran combat pilot, astronaut, and NASA official if it were not for these brave men.

Yet I must admit that when I was growing up, I did not know much about the Tuskegee Airmen, because their stories weren't being told in the schools I attended.

It so happens in 1977 when I was considering whether to apply for the astronaut program, that I got a call from a very good family friend, the same General Ben Davis. And General Davis asked me to apply to become an astronaut and told me I should do it for him and for the Tuskegee Airmen. This is 1977. And I said, General Davis, "What are the Tuskegee Airmen?"

After General Davis told me wonderful stories about this trailblazing band of brothers, I was inspired at the spot to join their association. I have been a proud member of that group since 1977. It's an amazing group of folks when you consider that after their heroic achievements, they came back to the states to fight battles yet won. And that was the fight to be treated equally as every one else in America.

I could say at this point that we should pause to remember and reflect on the valor and service of the Tuskegee Airmen. But I have a better idea. We are privileged to have here with us today some gentlemen who were part of this legendary group. I believe that Sam Rhodes, Bill Broadwater and Gus McLeod are in the audience. There may be some others. And I would like to ask these red suited gentlemen to stand up right now so that all of us can honor and salute these great Americans.

Let me add something about our good friend Gus McLeod, who's the president of the local chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen. In 1999 and 2000, this aviation pioneer made a history-making journey from Montgomery County Airpark to the geographic North Pole. He made this daring voyage, believe it or not in an open cockpit 1939 Boeing Kadet PT-17 known as a Stearman, and returned home through BWI. And this year, to honor the centennial of flight Gus plans to fly around the world—pole to pole—in a Lockheed Electra, the same type of aircraft that Amelia Earhart took on her last flight. And on this adventure, I think I can speak for us all in wishing you godspeed Gus McLeod.

Now today, thankfully because we have a more inclusive sense of our history, the story of the Tuskegee Airmen and their contributions to the struggle to integrate the armed forces is more widely known.

It is less widely known, however, that NASA went through a similar struggle. When the space age got underway, our country was not providing women, African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans with ample educational opportunities to become a part of our science and technology workforce.

Fortunately, our country did commit to open the door of opportunity for all members in the American family, prompted in no small measure by the heroic efforts of Dr. King and other civil rights leaders.

Because of their commitment to opportunity, and because of the dedication of African Americans to diligently prepare themselves for public service, today's NASA is not your father's NASA. You will find throughout our storied agency skilled and talented African Americans. They are helping us achieve tangible progress toward our mission goals of understanding and protecting the home planet, exploring the Universe and searching for life and inspiring the next generation of explorers.

We now also have outstanding African American astronauts, who I will discuss a bit later. They are part of a unique band that I'm proud to belong to. And I should mention that back in 1978, with the encouragement of my parents, who were with me every step of the way, and the encouragement of people like General Benjamin Davis, I had the honor of a lifetime to be accepted in the astronaut corps, with the first class of Shuttle astronauts.

I had great colleagues in the first class of Shuttle astronauts. Among them was Guy Bluford, a fellow Vietnam War veteran, who 20 years ago became the first African American in space, and went on to serve on four Space Shuttle missions.

And then there was the late Ron McNair, a wonderful man who had a doctorate in physics from MIT, was a black belt in karate, and could play a mean jazz saxophone. Unfortunately, we lost this extremely talented man when Ron tragically died in the Challenger accident on January 28, 1986. We shall never forget Ron and his contributions to our history.

Nor will we forget the contributions of Air Force Major Robert Lawrence, a talented fellow Vietnam Era pilot, who before losing his life in a training accident in 1967, was slated to become America's first African American astronaut.

And now, today, we sadly mourn along with his Columbia seven colleagues, another brave African American space hero, Michael Anderson.

Mike came into this world as a Christmas baby, and truly was a gift to us all. Like his fellow crewmates, Mike grew up dreaming of flight. This week in a newspaper interview, his aunt, Patricia Gibson, recalled how Mike used to run in circles around her living room with arms outstretched, tilting left, then right, pretending to be an airplane. "We knew even then that if he was going to be anything, he was going to be a pilot," she said. Mike went on to excel in school, showing his teachers an unquenchable curiosity about the natural world. His high school science teacher Hal Sautter said "he was one of those kids you had to use a shoehorn to get out of the lab."

Following in his father's footsteps, Mike volunteered to join the Air Force, and had a distinguished military career. In 1994 he joined the astronaut corps, and five years ago he spent more than eight days in space on the mission of the Shuttle Endeavour to the Russian space station Mir. On the Columbia mission, Mike, as Payload Commander, worked tireless to manage the mission's ambitious science experiments.

Mike held out the hope that some of these experiments would result in tangible medical progress on a concern that particularly afflicts African Americans. "We have a bioreactor which is growing prostrate cancer cells, and prostrate cancer has a high rate of return in African American males," he said from orbit. "And hopefully, from some of the research we're doing up here we can really help out in those areas."

Sadly, we will never know the results from this important research. But you have our assurance, that we will do our utmost to continue conducting such vital research in the unique microgravity environment of space.

And when we do return to Shuttle flights, our courageous astronauts will carry on this important work, fully supported by the dedicated NASA family. And let us take pride that helping to carry the torch of exploration and discovery forward will be our outstanding African American astronauts—Dr. Yvonne Cagle, Commander Robert Curbeam, Lieutenant Alvin Drew, Joan Higginbotham, Stephanie Wilson and Leland Melvin.

Leland, who many of you saw on television yesterday helping provide comfort to the parents of David Brown, not only represents our resolve to safely continue our exploration missions, but also our hopes for the future.

Let me tell you why Leeland, who has the only resume in America that contains the job titles of astronaut and pro-football player, represents our hopes for the future. Recently, Leeland has taken on the assignment of helping our efforts to inspire and motivate our youth to explore the wonders of math and science, and to aspire to be scientists, engineers, mathematicians and astronauts when they grow up.

One of our most fervent goals at NASA is to spark the enormous potential of the people who will help us pioneer the future, the young people right here in our audience, including students from my alma matter, Anacostia High School.

And I'd like all our students to stand up and be recognized for your passion to explore, to discover, and excel at whatever you set about to do. Would our next generation of explorers, our hope for the future, please stand up so that we can have the privilege of saluting you now, years before you head off on your journeys of discovery.

So today, even as we gather under mournful circumstances, let us resolve to gain perspective and wisdom from our history, remembering that even in circumstances of struggle or tragedy, we always have the power to persevere, to overcome, and to eventually triumph. Let us resolve, in the joyful spirit of the Columbia astronauts to keep setting our sights…all of us…all of God's children…on the stars. May God bless the crew of STS-107, and the intrepid explorers still to come. Thank you very much.

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